



# News Release

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## **Department of Health improves how it reports COVID-19 deaths**

**OLYMPIA** – To provide more accurate daily reports, the Washington State Department of Health is making changes to how it reports deaths from COVID-19. These changes will streamline the process as death counts increase. Rather than a preliminary cause of death, the agency will only use the official registered cause of death on the DOH [dashboard](#), providing more precise reporting.

Our normal process for releasing final death data is complex, involves multiple data systems, and can take up to 18 months from start to finish. This modified process requires that we make adjustments publicly and quickly without impacting the quality of the data or of our reporting.

Deaths due to factors other than COVID-19 can be hard to definitively rule out. For many of these conditions, COVID-19 may have hastened the death. These are the deaths we are reviewing, along with local health jurisdictions, to assess COVID-19's impact on the death.

These changes will result in an adjustment of death totals, including a removal of some deaths from figures made public. Initially, 214 previously reported deaths will be removed from the dashboard. We expect approximately 152 of those reported deaths will be added back once the cause of death is investigated and officially determined to be due to COVID-19. We anticipate this process will take about two weeks.

The Department of Health's COVID-19 response team is making two main modifications:

- We will no longer assume a death is caused by COVID-19 if a positive lab result is reported more than 28 days prior to death. Until now, we correlated a positive COVID-19 lab result up to 60 days prior to death. Using this new process, 68 such deaths are being removed from our dashboard today.

- Deaths won't be reported until they are fully registered in the Washington Health and Life Event System (WHALES). Just over 150 deaths that are only in the state's [Electronic Death Registration System \(EDRS\)](#) fit into this category. These deaths will return to dashboard death counts once they are registered in WHALES.

The latter change will create a longer delay in reporting deaths but will ultimately produce a more accurate picture when the death is reported.

In addition, reports will exclude deaths in which the certifier mentions positive COVID-19 tests, but later tests were negative and significant time elapsed between tests. Changes also call for adaptations in reconciling death reports with local health agencies.

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